

BELMAS Leadership in Early Years Education Event

Early Years: Finding Our Voice

4.30-6pm GMT, Tuesday 19th January 2021

Maddy Findon opens the event

Hello to all of you. Once again it is my absolute pleasure to invite you to our second online symposium. The contributions and the buzz around our last symposium really got us thinking about how we can make the changes that we're so desperate to see for the sector. And so the theme of this symposium is 'Early Years: Finding our Voice'.

For those of you who are new to the Leadership in Early Years Education group, we were founded about five years ago as one of the research interest groups in BELMAS. It was a response to the comparative lack of up to date research in this area and it sought to bring practitioners and academics together to work out what early years leadership looks like.

I can highly recommend BELMAS membership to those who are interested – high quality research, networking opportunities and an excellent annual conference, which usually has contributions from all around the world.

Fortune has smiled on us once again in terms of our speakers and we've got three fabulous speakers for tonight. First we'll be addressed by Aaron Bradbury Coffey who many of you already know I believe. He is a principal lecturer at Nottingham Trent University and he has extensive experience across the sector. Secondly, we have Taneshia Thompson from the London Early Years Foundation, and she is the manager of the Brixton Nursery. And finally, we have Ellen Dektar all the way from California, and she is a policy maker and advocate on children and family services. We'll be hearing presentations from three speakers about our voice and how we can be better heard, we'll then go into breakout rooms for finer-grained discussions, and then we'll come back together again for a wider discussion.

Aaron Bradbury Coffey

It's really exciting to be here and I don't know about you, but I feel that we definitely at this moment in time really need to re-focus and look at our early years voice, so it couldn't be more pertinent than now. I'm going to be looking at where we are now and where do we want to be. I'm an advocate for raising our voices in early years, and I've been talking about this, and so many people have been talking about this for so much longer than I have.

I am Principal Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University in childhood and early years.

So I'm going to give you an overview on who we are, where we're at and what our current early years sector looks like with some of the key issues that we've got facing us.

So who are we?

We are 97% female and 3% male. There are many people in here joining us that are advocates for bringing more males into the sector. We still have an over-reliance on our 16-19 education level 3 professionals. We do have a wide ranging graduate workforce and non-graduates, and our government sees them very much – not the sector, but the government – sees them very much on a

level playing field. And we also have another level playing field which is the perception that maintained nurseries and PVI's, again, we see ourselves on a level playing field but the reality is that the government does not and the reality is that we're not.

So what motivates us as practitioners, as professionals, to go into the early years sector? What is the real picture around this? The National Centre for Social Research did some research on this and these are the things that we all know for a fact – that this is a kind of a true picture of our early years sector. We've got pay poor progression, very low salaries. We've got an increasing workload and responsibility. There are very much physical and emotional demands of the job. I'm 36, you wouldn't think I am – I probably look more like 56. It's exacerbated by increasing paperwork and demands from employers and parents. There's an inability to support a family on current salaries. The amount of professionals that I talk to on a daily basis who work in early years who are constantly telling me that actually they don't earn enough to be able to go and buy their own home, or even just feed themselves and their family. And the lack of social recognition for early years education. There's still that perception that it's an easy option, that everybody can do it. It's that kind of rhetoric that I'm going to focus on.

So if we currently look at early years today, I am sure that we would all want to be on the right hand side, which is those lovely colourful, everything in its place, but in reality we're now facing a real element of chaos within our sector. Our early years voices could not be needed more than any time since I started this career. I think they're needed now more than ever.

But the realisation – there's a piece of research done by Helen Perkins, looking at what is the value of actually being qualified in early years? Because, being qualified in the early years is actually something that we should be proud of, something we should be really shouting about, and we still have this kind of graduate/level 3 divide. We all know that graduates can really change the practice within our settings, but actually it's really important that we also recognise that practice that our level 3 practitioners offer too.

I made this because I felt that this is where we're currently at within our early years picture. When we're talking about early years voices, are early years voices actually being heard? No. last Monday I sent an email to my MP and I'm still waiting on a reply now. If I was a big business boss talking very much about the money that my factory is going to bring in or something, I can tell you now that my MP more than likely would have got back to me, but because I'm early years, I'm still waiting for that reply now.

So – maintained and PVI settings – we're constantly playing a tug of war. The current rhetoric is that we say we're all one sector, and I do fundamentally believe we are, and I know many people also do, but the realisation is that the government, the policy-holders, have this idea and then our early years sector, maintained nurseries and PVI's, are constantly playing that tug of war. We're continually fighting, we're continually battling for our voices to be heard.

So these are just some of the ways that I feel we can change this. Obviously we do need to bring more investment in and one way to do that is to look at where that investment can really matter, and obviously graduates is one of those. But we do need to hear more informed research from the ground. We need to be hearing those practitioner researchers – we need to be changing policy.

This for me is a really important one and I'm going to talk about the early years academy in a moment. But we've got to get to a collective voice. Unfortunately we still have a long way to go. I'm quite lucky that I talk to many professionals, managers, practitioners across the sector and many people still don't even know their rights, how they can actually become research-informed, so

actually we need that collective responsibility, we need to be getting that information out there, which also informs our collective voice for change.

There's been some fantastic research highlighting what we're currently going through and actually, what we're going through currently is nothing new. We're just seeing it through a different lens. Early years has always been treated this way. It's just that coronavirus has exacerbated the situation. So Dr Valerie Daniels has really kind of supported that and she talks about the conflict that we're constantly dealing with – a fantastic piece of research, really suggest that you go and read it. But how do we start it? And where do we want to go?

For me, we've got to start within. We've got to start with our own practitioners, our own professionals. We've got to change. We've got to have that collective voice before we can move on and actually say to people: 'this is what we want'. We really need to know what we want, what that will do is it will strengthen the value of our voices as the collective. There are thousands of early years practitioners and imagine the impact that they can have if they had that collective voice. For me, it's – I feel that actually these are some ways that we can really start to get our voices heard, by being seen as equal ECE practitioners. So there is knowledge beyond level 3, but in reality lots of nurseries can't pay those graduate wages. We all know that more value needs to be given to early years practice. For me, one way to kind of enhance that – as part of my research and one of my outcomes that I'm looking at – is very much a post-qualifying year, which would have a regulatory body as part of that. A little bit like teaching, social work, nursing. I want to move away from level 3 and actually enhance that to a level 4. We've got to be realistic guys, yes, degrees are important but we're working with governments that don't ultimately understand children. They don't ultimately understand that actually we start at 0, not at 5. So that rhetoric I'm thinking we need to start slowly and look at a level 4, but we do need to look at government backing and a more governed approach to the role. And obviously employers need to become united as part of that too.

One way that I really do fundamentally believe – because I've done a bit of research on this – is through the new early years academy that myself and Juliette Davies of EY Matters has set up and we've got a fantastic group of people who are supporting us with this, and one way that I fundamentally believe we can really gain the traction of hearing our early years voices is very much about giving them a new recognition – a new level of recognition, which would actually really kind of instil that confidence that ability to be able to say actually, I've been recognised by the early years academy as a fellow of the early years academy, and I know that what my practice, my thinking and my knowledge can really be supported here and it just gives you that confidence to be able to speak up and say actually I know what I'm talking about. Not only am I qualified, but I've also had recognition by these guys as well.

So that is basically how I feel that early years practitioners can really raise their voices and I feel that our voices are needed more than ever and if we come as a collective, our voices will be heard.

Taneshia Thompson

I'm going to talk about how we communicate the importance of early years to others and I'm going to speak from experience and what I do as a nursery manager.

How I and my team and the people I work with communicate the importance of early years is through our pedagogy, and through our values, events that we do with the parents, workshops, outings, home learning, action research and project plans – so those are some of the things that we

do to communicate the importance of early years to everybody. I guess that the main people are the parents, the teachers and the community. From doing that we hope to bring a better understanding of the importance of early years, and to hopefully make a difference.

So I'll talk a little bit about our pedagogy. So our pedagogy is built specifically for early years taking into consideration their age and their stage of development. For us it's important because it supports and builds and strengthens the staff ability to understand their role and their purpose, to value parent partnership and pedagogical conversations that we have with the parents. What we want is to enable the parents to have a better understanding of the importance of early years and to raise the bar so that they can see how important it is.

Through parents events we've been able to reach so many families. For example, we've had families who when they are starting the nursery, the parents were really shy, didn't want to speak to anybody, they would just push the children inside, or just be on the phone and through parents' events, they've been able to really build a social community – a community outside of the nursery by making friends with the other parents and so on. We've had parents who do not speak English who were able to form relationships with other parents and find out services in the community and so on. So those are all the things that I think support starting to show everybody how important early years is.

The second thing is – how do we overcome the division in the sector so that we can stand stronger together? I feel the reason why there is a division is that there is a lack of understanding of the importance of services in the early years and child development, and awareness of how the children's outcomes will affect them in their later lives. I think that's one of the reasons why there is a division in the sector. So how it shapes the children's character and empowers them to improve their capabilities and their life chances. I don't think it's understood by many people and that's why I think we're not respected or valued as much as other sectors and I think that's one thing I'd like to see change is for everyone to have a better understanding of how important it is for children to meet their early goals, their prime areas.

I've worked with a group of teenagers who have left care and they are learning to live on their own and so on and I could really see the link with the two and three year olds that I work with – and how they really struggle in their prime areas, not being able to communicate their feelings, express themselves, and you can just see the impact of how it then affects them later on in their lives if it's not achieved early on. So I really think that a lot more work needs to go into the sector really raising the bar and having a voice so that everyone can see how important it is for society, for us to really invest in this age group.

Also, engagement with the community. I've worked with quite a few nurseries within LEYF. One of them was a social impact nursery. I worked in South London, in Peckham, 90% of the children had additional needs. They would come in, no language, no social interaction at the age of 3 and so on, and then still the schools were taking them younger and younger at the age of 2, so I had to do a lot of work in the community just to express to them the importance of them staying in the nursery for longer, so that they can be nurtured and so we can really look after them before they go to school. Because they were going to school before they were school-ready. So just working in partnership with the children's centres and so on.

That's another thing – there's not many children's centres around anymore. So I think I would love to see some change in the government and the policies to bring back lots of early years services like

there were before, because I think it's really impacting on how children are developing and it's just making the gap wider.

In terms of policy to enable a stronger early years - I think policies are better influenced when parents are more informed about what good quality childcare looks like. I do that through parent engagement, working with the teachers to make sure that they have as much CPD training as possible and just having lots of day to day conversation with the parents. The projects that we do – at the moment we're doing a literacy project and it's all about empowering the parents to understand that small things they do at home can have a really big impact on the children and so on. So I think it's all about strengthening the parents' knowledge as well, the teachers, the staff that you work with and so on.

Ellen Dektar

Good evening to you – it's morning in California. Thank you so much for inviting me. I think we share so many common challenges that transcend states, countries and I really appreciate getting to hear what you're thinking about and share a little bit of what we've been working on at various levels of government in the United States. I've been with the Alameda County California early childhood education and care programme for 20 years, to my surprise, because I love connecting childcare programmes with policy makers and that's what we do at the agency I work with. We're part of Alameda County which is one of the larger counties in California. I've been working on childcare programme advocacy for about 30 years from both within and without the government. I started with a national children's advocacy group called the Children's Defence Fund, and then went to work in the state government in California related to childcare during welfare reform, then the San Francisco's mayor office, and then I've been with Alameda County for 20 years, so I'm bringing a little bit of insight.

I'll give you an overview of what I'm going to talk about. First of all, I wanted to take a peek at the numbers of our children and how different levels of government compare with UK and US, and California, and then I'm going to talk a little bit about what we've been doing during Covid. Our field has been drastically impacted by the pandemic, as yours has been as well – I'll talk about what we've been able to do as a result of our advocacy. And then talk a little bit about mechanisms for elevating early care and educator voice at different levels of policy makers and then conclude with a little bit about parent voice, which Taneshia was talking about, and it's so important and it's been really effective in California.

So if we look at the numbers in Alameda County, we have about 117,000 young children, in California we have about 3.8 million, nationally it's 23 million and then – old numbers from the UK – but what we could find easily was 3.5 million 0-4 year olds in the UK, so that might be more comparable to our California, when we're thinking about what we could do at different levels. I think that the poverty figures are relative. I'm sure our kids are more poor than yours but you just have higher standards. But when you look at race and ethnicity we're pretty diverse in California and then our county, with a lot of Asian American young children, Hispanic Latino young children and black young children. In my county in particular we just found, we had a family childcare grant, we have home based childcare which is licensed, and providers who receive a grant were with families speaking over 48 different languages. So that's some background.

Let's talk about what happened during Covid. So when the pandemic started in mid-March, at the county level we formed a coalition of organisations that work with our childcare field and we had

things called 'resource and referral' agencies, which help parents find childcare and help support childcare programmes, those are funded by our state. My programme – we have a small foundation in every California county called the first five commission, that has tobacco tax dollars to give out, our social services agencies and we had a point person for Covid at our public health department. So we came together and we wanted to assess the impact on our childcare field of Covid and I had, just by luck, a young woman who is a statistician and she was able to start surveying programmes with our partners and we saw that pre-Covid here we had in family childcare homes over a 1000 spaces, and many spaces in our licensed childcare centres, and you can see how drastically the availability of the spaces dropped following the pandemic and they are still severely down.

We have 66% of our family based programmes and 56% of our centres open. And that's because the ratios, the group sizes were limited for Covid and so programmes can't make it financially if they even are willing to take the health risks to stay open. So we used this data to advocate with state policy makers and as a result of that advocacy nationally, money was made available which I'll talk about in a minute. Our California policy makers provided \$3million.

This was not my county, but in terms of communicating with policy makers, this organisation in San Francisco called the children's council came up with a really powerful public information campaign pegged to the economy and it said 'you get medical care, because she has childcare' – here's another example: 'you get groceries because she has childcare'. So focusing on the economics of childcare and what it gives to the economy is really important. We have a long way to go and we're still struggling but I'm just showing you some of our rays of hope.

I also just wanted to mention quickly. Aaron was talking about workforce and it sounded like pay issues – that's absolutely similar in the US and we have an amazing research group called the centre for the study of the childcare workforce, which has quantified for years and years how underpaid our workforce is and our workforce is probably 87-90% women of colour, so it's really a social justice issue as well. And despite all the research we've been unable to obtain better pay for childcare educators, or the care and education workforce, we're still working on it. We're hopefully poised to do that in California with a supportive governor. If you look in the US, one region known for getting better pay for the childcare workforce is the state of New Jersey which actually required bachelors level degrees for all childcare staff. However, in California or elsewhere that's really problematic unless you support the current workforce – do you grandfather them in, so many of our childcare educators are dual language learners or aren't going to go back and get formal education, so I wanted to mention that.

Anyway, so with the combination data of and communications, and the state level advocacy in California, we were able to obtain some state resources for childcare and in the united states, the California labour unions have been really influential, our home-based providers recently unionised and they really advocated at the state level for PPE – like masks and sanitiser for working with children. There are associations of subsidised providers who advocated successfully for them to be paid even though they weren't serving children in person during the pandemic. They were providing distant learning. And then private providers really spearheaded a lot of advocacy themselves around obtaining a priority for vaccines along with K12 school teachers, and they were successful, and they still haven't had access to them because we're still working down from vaccines for healthcare workers but really the majority of our public K12 schools have been closed this entire time and our childcare workforce, which has been supporting parents and who need childcare.

So a national coalition elevated childcare needs in the United States, again taking this lens that childcare is necessary to keep America working and you'll see at the bottom they had data about the number of providers who may disappear due to the pandemic, that they obtained through surveys.

An outcome of that work is that at the national government provided \$3.5 billion in its first round of relief funding, in December it provided \$10 billion for childcare programmes and California is expected to get \$1 billion of this, and then our president-elect Joe Biden who takes office tomorrow has provided \$40 billion – a proposal for the childcare field, the field had been advocating for \$50 billion, so you can see that he's trying to make up the difference, but that has to be debated with the congress before its confirmed.

I'll just add one more thing in terms of effective arguments for childcare – really I think our most effective argument has been that 90% of a child's brain develops before they're 5 – and that childcare helps to build those connections, and that seems to have got a lot of attention before the pandemic, although it has not given childcare providers the wages they deserve of course.

I'll just touch quickly on different mechanisms we've built to elevate childcare programme voice on policy and the first one I'll just summarise is childcare planning councils – which is where I've worked for twenty years.

Childcare planning councils are funded by the state of California, although not well, I don't know if you all do the equivalent, but we're given the equivalent of a third of a staff person to convene in our county what is a 25 person childcare planning council and the mandated membership by lot is 20% childcare providers, who represent all types of providers, family childcare, school district providers, Head Start, and both private and public, subsidized and non-subsidised providers, and other mandated categories include parents and government agencies and organisations.

These planning councils have a role in terms of collecting information where the childcare gaps are the greatest in our areas and we focus on workforce training as well as access and quality and facilities development and we have a number of committees and we directly inform policy and programme decisions at all levels of government, or we'd like to. We just wrote on Friday a letter to the governor regarding his new proposed budget.

At the state level, we do have an ECE coalition with the major childcare associations and networks and agreeing priorities is really hard with a very big field. I think everyone would say that workforce pay is the number one, however, it is the most expensive. So we work on other issues and annually agree on priority budget items. They had one campaign called A Billion for Babies, a couple of years ago, and this year, their campaign is going to be Babies Matter in California. A key ally of this group is the Californian Women Legislative Caucus and this group pays a lobbyist.

So another way to engage policy-makers in the cause of childcare is just taking them out to see you and what you're doing at your sites. When I was at the Children's Defence Fund, which was a pretty well regarded organisation, they knew that if leaders could see exemplary providers and children, they themselves could be a forceful voice for advocacy. We use site visits to target populations like philanthropists or service organisations to spark their advocacy.

So we take leaders out to see really great programmes and couple it with policy information. We focus on how programmes like childcare programmes are prevention rather versus later expensive intervention and children themselves are the best ambassadors for the work.

There's a quote by Mark Twain who said 'if you're looking for friends when you need them, it's too late'. So the idea of Child Watch is that you cultivate the relationships.

In terms of other noteworthy advocacy in the US, in the late 1980s, there was a big childcare advocacy campaign. Providers all over the US sent in pieces of a paper chain with writing the children's names and ages on it, elected officials signed the chain, and they created a link from the white house to the capitol to have an event to advocate for that – which obviously would be harder during the pandemic.

The key is just finding a way for providers to be advocates regardless of whether they are big public speakers, they can just stand in hearings with bright signs. In the old days, there was a big campaign in North Carolina where they faxed in support for a bill and it was starting to annoy the staff of the policy makers – but that's the point – there is strength in numbers and you have power.

Finally, let's talk about parent voice and what they've been able to accomplish in California. There's a non-profit called parent voices, which organises parents to be advocates for affordable, accessible and quality childcare and parent stories have so much influence on elected officials. It's really – you can see it – you can see them paying attention. There's 16 chapters in our state, and our local parent voices chapter in Oakland initiated with unions a campaign that was successful to get \$150 million locally for early care and education, actually it's pending in the courts, there are legal lawsuits, but we're optimistic that will happen and that's one way of increasing provider pay. And they also obtained \$100,000 dollars in county funding from an elected official for a programme for homeless childcare that we are trying to help turn into a state wide programme.

Thank you so much – I know there are some parallels and some differences in our work, but hopefully there's something in there that you'll find useful in the UK.

Discussion

An important note –

Following breakout group discussions, we came together to discuss what we had heard. The points below were made by individuals – speakers and participants – who have not been identified. We are sharing the points because we think it is an important to build on the dialogues that were part of the event, but we do recognise that these are individuals' points of view. We thank all the event participants for their contributions and if anyone would prefer to see their comment removed or attributed, please do just let us know. You can contact Mona via email: m.sakr@mdx.ac.uk

Each new paragraph represents a new speaker entering the dialogue.

Is there something that we can all agree on? Is there something that we can all agitate for change on? Is there something small that we can all agree on? A friend who is a community organiser told me that the trick is to start with something small – you start with something that you can actually win. You don't go 'here is this massive issue, we need to change the identity of the sector, we need to do this', instead you go 'here is one thing that we know that we all need. Whether it's testing in early years settings at the moment for example – can we all go, yes this is something that we need, and then make it happen? And in doing that, actually start to find what this voice might look like and how it might feel to all come together in that kind of way.

That was what we were saying as well – what is the one thing we can agree on? Because there's not a lot we all agree on. But that's the question we have to start from.

Part of the problem we have is that there are so many different groups and it's hard to get everybody to work together. There are attempts but that is possibly something that needs to be addressed.

That's kind of what we were discussing in our group – if we want to change or influence policy, we need to come together as one and have one voice. We were discussing what we can do to raise awareness, and that was our question.

Awareness of what? The importance of early years?

Yes – the importance of early years. I think with Covid-19 it's a real example of how effective it can be and how it can bring positive change if we all work together as one sector with the same message.

We're all talking very much about this one sector but what's important – it's the understanding of what different parts of the sector (e.g. PVIs, maintained nursery schools) are and why they are different. Small steps that can make a big change. I'm constantly having these conversations about why there are different providers being treated differently. While MNS is under the regulatory body as a school, inspected under the school inspection framework, has a governing body – we don't know about those complexities that sit within our early years sector. We need to understand those complexities before we can understand what it means to be one sector. Those steps could make a real difference.

Government is critically aware of the difference between PVI funding and the MNS funding which is deemed expensive and they do want parity – they want to bring the funding down for the MNS, they don't want to raise funding and bring us onto a level playing field. We can get too focused on what each other are doing, rather than looking up to government and saying you need to raise funding across the board for this sector. There are issues throughout relating to salaries and the job that people are doing.

Is it also about language? There's so much difference in the language we use – whether we talk about early years, or childcare, or ECEC, and Ellen I was wondering in the context where you are – is that a conversation you're having? Does language matter?

Yes, our sector is super-complicated and similar to yours. We're leaving that aside and focusing on increased investment. We have subsidies that come with the kids, and subsidised programmes. The Billion for Babies campaign is about getting more money into the voucher system. There seems to be a common support for that because the education system is better funded and the demand is higher for the young children right now. But focusing on increased investment and working with the women elected officials are two good strategies – though men can be helpful, looking for women as allies.

I'm interested in how people responded to the campaign you showed us – you get medical support because she gets childcare etc. – it's really interesting and powerful, but there's also a tension, because we're trying to get away from the 'it's just childcare'.

Same thing here – that's why the brain development argument is building some bridges. That early childhood educators are changing the architecture of baby's brains and it will have lasting impacts. And they need to be playing – it needs to be developmentally appropriate. And you might have a variety of views about the educational philosophy – let 1000 flowers bloom, we're not trying to control that, we're just trying to get more money into the system. Workforce is poorly paid but then what little steps can be taken.

They are beautiful examples of communications campaigns – how much do these things cost?

I don't think that campaign was very expensive and in San Francisco they were kind of already bought in. We want to use that – their graphics as well – we've reached out to them, because they can be adapted.

It's easy for us to put things out with social media but you're generally preaching to the converted. The ideal would be to see those things around every bus shelter, but with our under-funding, where do we find the wherewithal to do that?

You need money and partnerships. Another campaign that was super effective in the US was Talk Read Sing – but that wasn't to invest in childcare, but that was more about equipping parents with the tools and Hilary Clinton championed that – but the UK is smaller, so you can do it.

It's reminding me of a conference about Men in Childcare – and the discussion was around the campaign that you'd use to get more men into childcare, but then what would the campaign show? What is the message? Do you use stereotypes or counter them? So in this case, what is the message? Is the message you need to look after this sector because you can't do anything without childcare, or is it that you need to look after this sector because the future of the population is in the hands of this sector?

In our group, we felt that it was both messages that you needed to get across.

I agree – both are significant, but there's a bit of me that feels that if we say we're only here so others can go to work, it demeans what we do. If there's too much emphasis on that it demeans the fact that we're building children's brains in the first five years of life, which is so important. There's also something about that social investment – even the Duchess of Cambridge's campaign – was saying that we'll save that much money in the future if we invest in the early years, so that's almost a third strand.

I completely agree. You'll never raise status of the sector if you focus on care, because care is seen as something that people instinctively do. The preschool learning alliance came about from the mums coming together, and it's still perceived as something that mums do, and therefore nobody is going to pay the salaries that educators really deserve if you go down that route.

I think we're talking about different things – we do something to raise the public awareness that if they didn't have someone to look after their children, they couldn't function. But if you're going to put forward something about the importance of good quality early years, it's got to be something that parents and society can get behind. We're not getting across the issues within early childhood, but first I think we have to get the public awareness to the importance of childcare and education, but once they've engaged with that, engage with why it's so important for young children to have quality experiences. I don't think any parent would disagree with you – from my experience, the reason why parents don't get quality early childhood education for their children is that they can't afford it.

That's the exciting point – is society as aware as we think it is? During Covid the discourse has been on school readiness – the wider opinion through society via the media is that children are somehow being disadvantaged by what we do and we need to seize that narrative and push on that fact that we need funding, we are essential. One of the greatest mistakes we made was getting rid of that level of training for secondary school students about the importance of child development. There's lots of people who come in as trainees so that's one area we could look at – to make sure that society has that understanding of child development.

So is princess Kate going to save us? Is that the narrative – that we're going to be saved by a princess charming? With the research and the report, it's highlighting things that we know are important, but perhaps it's really important to get the message out there? Perhaps there is real value in a princess coming on board.

It's really important – the research is there – we all know that, the issue is getting that across to the wider population. A princess is a way to get a lot of attention to something that doesn't get a lot of attention otherwise. These are important issues and the issue is how we communicate them – social media can do its bit, advocacy can do its bit but they need to be joined up. I think having an overarching governance or association is key and that's an area of more work.

What's the steer here? Where do we need to go next? What's the next bit of dialogue in order to move things forward in terms of early years voice?

The problem with saying that early years is about getting others to their work is that it devalues us, we become a commodity. If we want to be more valued then there needs to be a lot more awareness of what early education is and we need to promote that so that people take it seriously.

Which links to what Taneshia was talking about in the presentation.

We need to tell our stories of what we do and how important it is. I've got friends who are teachers and they talk about their planning, but when you compare it to the depth of how we plan to the individual child and their interests, what we do is so ambitious, linking it to the community and so on. It's about telling our story about what we do. They don't realise how much we do. That's why I value the parent events we do, because it helps the parents to understand how important it is to support their children but it also raises awareness about what we do and how hard we work. We were also saying that a lot of the workshops and talks advertised cost a fair amount of money, and if we really want to come together and have a collective voice, we need to change that – we're so underpaid in this sector, we can just about take care of ourselves, then to have to pay to learn and grow and become empowered...

So it's about storytelling.

It's about telling our story – finding the way to do that. Ellen talked a lot about brain development, and that's really close to my heart and it's so important for as many people as possible to understand that early brain development. Talk to your child, talk to your baby, be a commentator. A lot of parents do it and don't realise the benefits it has for their child. They think they're just talking. Even one of my staff members she was saying how much she's learned about nurturing and interacting with your children and she can see the difference between her children, and she shares the knowledge with others. We underestimate how much we do and we really need to tell our stories.